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Little Red Herrings — Far From the Maddening [sic] Crowds

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

We live in an age of chattering masses, a phrase not to be confused with “the chattering classes.” The latter were eggheads, soi-disant intellectuals, or tweed-coated academics who readily opined on any topic, some of whom actually knew what they were talking about. The chattering classes essentially talked to each other, noses firmly in the air at times, so the rest of us hoi-polloi might learn something. It was a phrase for an elitist age, and it did not sit well as we began to let it all hang out.

Today, however, we have thrown out the chattering classes for the chattering masses. In our hyper-connected age, everybody talks to everybody else, with all sorts of entertaining news from the burned toast, to the failed romance, to that meatloaf-did-not-sit well-last-night-#-explosion. And speaking of explosions, we “blow up” the Twitterverse with our claptrap that masquerades as real conversations and human connections. Essentially we are all talking to ourselves because no one is really listening.

The delight in all this is its *instantaneous*! I italicize the word because that lends both credibility and celerity to it. It’s another way of saying there is no time for reflection, no time for second thoughts (those are shared later, if at all), or even any time for self-censorship. The most interesting of these are the chronicles of romance that run the gamut

from the icky schmaltz to the randy obscene. Celebrities going off on each other are also fun, as are companies that say what shouldn’t be said and offend most everyone, or say what they should, but their timing is off preempting company headquarters. Then there are those government nudniks who think they know what they’re doing, but blurt out information that was really meant to be secret, classified, or released at a later date.

That *instantaneousness* I italicized earlier is partly to blame. Everyone is in a rush to be first, to get there — wherever there is — before anyone else does. So, they rush the bread out of the oven, and lo and behold, when it comes out all gooey and inedible, they are confounded by it, hoisted on their own petards. And yet it continues, day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year. Even presidents,

especially those who are so certain they are tech-savvy-cool end up tweeting when they should have been truckling to the Constitution.

We enjoy Twitter nitwits like **Anthony Weiner** — only God could have a sense of humor like this — who thinks of the Internet as a cone of silence (<http://bit.ly/1cbqLIZ>) and so send pictures that this family magazine cannot even describe. In many ways, people like this deserve what they get, courtesy of the lightning rod we call the Internet.

But none of this worries me so much as these anonymous chattering masses that no

one knows who they are, only that they are legion. They shout about a movie, a book, a company, a factoid, not knowing much about any of these things but loving the sound of their clicking keys. I have written before of **Farhad Manjoo’s** excellent article about how online readers won’t read to the end of an article before commenting; they rarely read beyond the first scroll (<http://slate.me/1cJ7b5C>). Elsewhere (<http://bit.ly/1hT0ccL>) I have written about **Dan Fagin’s** experience of writing about his brother-in-law’s heart attack (<http://slate.me/1jKqXAM>) only to have his Twitter followers have **Fagin** dead and buried. One group even began a prayer chain — a nice gesture to be sure — but for **Fagin** not his brother-in-law. Then there is the Twitter crowd who paused to reflect on **Neil Armstrong’s** death ... a year too late (<http://usat.ly/1g9rf69>).

This isn’t so much a reading problem — though it certainly is that — as it is a cultural shift to react, not think, to post, never reflect, to chatter, and not shut up for even a second. They ruin movies, people’s lives, restaurants, appliances, books, enterprises large and small, and for what? For no other reason than they want to see their ALL CAPS IN PRINT. For this we are giving up newspapers, personal communications, books, libraries, and Lord only knows what else!

Europeans have long thought of Americans as shallow, frivolous, and a bit too silly. We complain that they are staid and too “uptight.” But are we a bit too superficial for our own good?

Are our own technology, our tweets, and our posts proving their criticisms in spades? 🐼



Booklover — Gross National Happiness

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Is there such a thing as too much happiness? This question can open a never-ending philosophical discussion. When the Canadian author **Alice Munro** won the **2013 Nobel Prize for Literature** in the fall, the question was brought to mind again. The numerous press releases announcing her award mentioned the 2009 collection of short stories entitled “Too Much Happiness.” It was time again to check out a book. I read the book on my Kindle, checked out from the **Charleston County Library**, processed through my account at Amazon — this makes me happy.

If you are a follower of this column you are aware that I don’t review books — I connect them to life. This new book and author were presenting a challenge until I expressed

my dilemma early one morning to my running buddy. She responded with “Have you ever heard of the concept of “Gross National Happiness?” to which I responded “No.” A quick education, and I had the connection I needed to write.

In the over 100 page document “A Short Guide to Gross National Happiness Index” written by **Karma Ura, Sabina Alkire, Tshoki Zangmo, and Karma Wandi** of **The Center for Bhutan Studies**, I learn: “In the GNH Index, unlike certain concepts of happiness in current western literature, happi-

ness is itself multidimensional — not measured only by subjective well-being, and not focused

narrowly on happiness that begins and ends with oneself and is concerned for and with oneself. The pursuit of happiness is collective, though it can be experienced deeply personally. Different people can be happy in spite of their disparate circumstances and the options for diversity must be wide.” “The GNH Index provides an

overview of performance across 9 domains of GNH (psychological well-being, time use, com-



continued on page 51